

Beyond Appreciation: From the Visual to the Visible
Peggy Wang
Bowdoin College Honors Day 2019

President Rose, Dean McCormack, esteemed colleagues, parents, friends, and especially the students we celebrate here: I am honored to have the opportunity to offer some brief remarks. First, I offer my heartfelt congratulations to the students, their mentors, and families. We honor your amazing achievements tonight.

One of the things I love most about Honors Day is that we have a chance to celebrate all of our departments and programs. We don't often gather in this way and it is a fantastic occasion to give recognition to you—our students—*as well as* to recognize the passions and projects that thrive in all corners of the liberal arts.

I think this is a particularly important reminder given that we are also living at a time when colleges are—more and more—asked to be explicit about the relevance of what is taught. That you students and your parents can clearly see the ways in which a liberal arts degree prepares you to go out into the world. This is, more often than not, framed as the *professional* world: that college is here to prepare you with the knowledge and skills to enter the professional workforce.

But, as someone who teaches and researches about cultural globalization—that is, the mobility of contemporary art, people, information, and media—when I think of the phrase “the world,” I am actually thinking of the world-at-large. In geographical, geo-political, and geo-cultural terms. And so, in terms of preparing you to go out into the world, I think we do exactly this: enable you to think critically about how you position yourself, and how you see yourself and see others. And, I would argue, that this is not at all divorced from “professional training”—in fact, it is as central to your lives now as to the bright futures into which you are all heading.

So, how do we go about doing this? Bowdoin's Offer of the College provides some guidance on how you might be expected to navigate the world. Every week, when I walk through H-L, I am struck by that first line inscribed on the wall: “To be at home in all lands”...Tonight, I will dwell on this line of the Offer.

As an Asian American woman who has lived and worked in predominately white spaces, I marvel at the ask—or rather, the offer—here. Because even in the lands that I have spent a lifetime inhabiting, the notion that one can truly feel at home is something that comes about, at best, through negotiation. At worst, through resignation that this is accessible to some, but not all, people.

But, I also understand the deep idealism motivating this phrase; as the daughter of immigrants to the United States, I hold fast to the belief that this is something that can, in fact, happen. I have seen first-hand the struggles—deep desire and incredible sacrifice—that come with adopting a new country as a home...and yet in many ways perpetually being seen as outsiders. This is something that is passed down through generations—for me, of being asked where I’m really from, of people impressed by my facility with the English language, and any number of indignities big and small... Through a lifetime of feeling both incredibly visible and yet also sometimes deeply invisible, I have come to see that being at home in all lands is not something that can be accomplished out of sheer willpower.

As we adapt this sentiment and, indeed, ambition to our current day and age, I think we need to be attentive to two parts of this now:

First, to be at home in all lands is to go beyond “appreciating” people and cultures from across the world—and instead knowing and respecting them. To speak *to* rather than speak *for* others even in places presumed to be “home.”¹

Second, to recognize the responsibility over spaces where one *can*—even right here at Bowdoin—help to make into places in which all people *can be* at home. Not everyone can do the latter. But, I have been thinking about how as an Art Historian here, there are things I can do:

This starts from helping to make clear to students—in my own discipline—that there are endemic structures that have privileged the representation of some and marginalization of others. In confronting and reckoning with the inequalities in representation, perhaps one day the illuminated promise of the offer might indeed come into fruition.

¹ This phrasing borrows from Craig Owens’s language in “The Global Issue: A Symposium,” *Art in America* 77, no. 7 (July 1989): 89.

The first line of the Offer of the College actually states in full: “To be at home in all lands and all ages.” This seems to apply then as much to one’s comfort as to one’s knowledge of places and cultures across time and space.

Given that my own subfield is Asian Art History, I, of course, see the merits to this and stand by it. I am always delighted by the discoveries that happen in the classroom: where students encounter the intricacies of ritual bronze vessels, the spirit resonance of ink paintings, complexities of conceptual art from the past decade in China, etc. That through this, they come to know tenets of Confucianism and Buddhism, they become familiar with major world events, they are exposed to new perspectives... Undoubtedly, an important part of being a global citizen is being informed.

But, it is about more than just accumulating knowledge of other places. And Art History is about more than just training people to be “cultured.”

This requires a shift: from an attitude of cultural appreciation through art or even art appreciation through culture. And instead, turning this back on ourselves and re-assessing our own assumptions and beliefs *about the world*, how it is ordered, and even the values that we assume to be true.

To quote one art historian: “Art History is about making the visible legible.”² And, yes, that is certainly one aspect of what we do: to make meaning through visual literacy, to give students the skills to unpack and make legible images and objects from all over the world.

But, it also involves stepping back to reconsider: why historically, have only certain images and objects been made visible. Who determines this? Who decides what qualifies as “art” and thus gets written into or out of history? And what are the implications of these dynamics of visibility?

This starts at the introductory level: by just asking students to think about the implications of the disparity of coverage in our *Art History* textbook, when one chapter is dedicated to 16th c. Art in Italy—covering just 100 years—and another is titled “Chinese and Korean Art before 1279.”

² Donald Preziosi, “Art History: Making the Visible Legible,” *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7–11.

To have students grapple with questions of: why when we think of the Great Masters in Art, only particular names and artworks are commonplace?

Why is “modern art” often only thought of as the sole purview of North America and Western Europe? What does it mean to think in terms of “multiple modernities”—to allow for creativity and originality to also thrive in Japan, China, Indonesia?

To engage in thought exercises: why when I see a propaganda poster, I don’t think of it as art? What are my own standards of evaluation based on? Do I think that art should be something rare, original, made by a single person? If, instead, I think that art should be for the people, wouldn’t a collective endeavor widely disseminated have even greater value? How does calling it “propaganda” become a dismissive way of relegating it outside of “art history”?

In short, as an Art Historian, I have come to see that in order to equip students to “be at home in all lands and all ages” it is not only to give them the tools to engage the visual, but also to foster the tools for critically questioning who and what is made visible to them.

As we stand here tonight at Honors Day, we have the perfect chance to see how powerful it is to be recognized, to be seen, and to be supported. I hope you all hold dear this experience in the power of visibility as you navigate “the world” ahead: as you continually think about how you position yourself, reflect on how you see yourself, *and* see those around you.

Thank you.